

Soviet Party Retreat Emboldens Nation

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Feb. 8—Emboldened by the Soviet Communist Party's historic decision to end its monopoly on power and accelerate reforms, Lithuanian political leaders have gained even more confidence, predicting that the republic's parliament will declare independence within several months.

At the same time, 100 prominent Estonians, including the republic's Prime Minister Indrek Toome, published an appeal in the regional press today calling for a "free Estonia within a common European home and a multi-party democracy." Many communists in Estonia are planning to form a Democratic Reform Party. Others have already broken off to form a Social Democratic Party.

After a wave of mostly peaceful democratic change swept across Eastern Europe in the second half of last year, it has become

clear that two key political issues face the Soviet leadership in 1990: demands for a multi-party system and for republican independence, especially in the Baltic states. In the months ahead, a myriad of social movements and parties in the Baltics, including the Communist Party organizations there, are expected to press Moscow ever harder on the issue of independence.

Romualdas Ouzalas, a member of the Lithuanian Communist Party Politburo, said in an interview that he expects "some forms of independence within a year," and only a "relatively restrained" response from Moscow.

"It is clear there will never be tanks. I think the worst we can expect—and this is a real possibility—is an economic blockade," Ouzalas said. "Frankly, I think Gorbachev no longer sees the independence movement here as an enemy, the way he might have a couple of months ago."

Candidates from the independence move-

ment Sajudis and the liberal wing of the Lithuanian Communist Party are expected to sweep the Feb. 24 legislative elections. Ouzalas and others said that among the legislature's first acts will be the adoption within several months at most of a "declaration of the renewal of Lithuanian independence."

The republic was independent for two decades before a pre-war agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union put the Baltic states in the Kremlin's sphere of influence. The Lithuanian legislature, as well as those in Latvia and Estonia, already have declared that agreement, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, "null and void." The national legislature, the Congress of People's Deputies, also has declared the pact illegal.

At the conclusion of a three-day session Wednesday of the Soviet Communist Party's policy-making Central Committee, there was a mild rebuke of the Lithuanian Communists' decision last December to

ialists in Baltic States

break with Moscow. But the Soviet party also invited the Lithuanian Communists to elect delegates to the 28th Party Congress, a crucial meeting scheduled for late June or early July.

"The ball is in their court," Soviet Vice President Anatoly Lukyanov said of the Lithuanian Communists. Gorbachev has promised that the leadership intends to rewrite the terms of the union, allowing greater independence to the 15 republics and even a process for secession.

The Soviet party's decision this week to end seven decades of monopoly Communist rule in the Soviet Union and to avoid a full-blown attack on the Lithuanian party brought satisfaction and celebration in the Baltic states, where multi-party systems have been on the rise for months.

"I think it is clear that when Gorbachev came up to Lithuania [last month] and heard what people had to say, when he saw how the Communists in this republic regained

prestige by radically reforming their organization, he and dozens of other Central Committee members changed their minds about us and about themselves," said Arvydas Jouzaitis, a leader of Sajudis.

Although Lithuania's legislature is now exploring questions of "self-governance" in its current session and is likely to pass a declaration of independence after this month's multi-party elections, the question of when and if actual independence from the Soviet Union will come is still open.

"The point is that the process is moving apace, and the Baltics especially are invariably going to continue getting more and more concessions to their demands for greater economic, political and cultural independence," Jouzaitis said.

"But if you ask me to name a date when Lithuania will have a relationship with Russia the way, say, Belgium does with France, well, no one can answer that. But things happen quickly, don't they?"